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Mwotlap language

Mwotlap (pronounced [ŋ͡mʷɔtˈlap]; formerly known as *Motlav*) is an Oceanic language spoken by about 2,100 people in Vanuatu. The majority of speakers are found on the island of Motalava in the Banks Islands,[3] with smaller communities in the islands of Ra (or *Aya*) and Vanua Lava,[4] as well as migrant groups in the two main cities of the country, Santo and Port Vila.

Mwotlap was first described in any detail in 2001, by the linguist Alexandre François.

Volow, which used to be spoken on the same island, may be considered a dialect or a separate language.

Mwotlap	
Motlav	
Pronunciation	[ŋ͡mʷɔtˈlap]
Native to	Vanuatu
Region	Mota Lava island, Banks Islands
Native speakers	2,100 (2012)[1]
Language family	Austronesian
	• Malayo-Polynesian
	• Oceanic
	• Southern Oceanic
	• Vanuatu
	• North Vanuatu
	• Torres–Banks
	• **Mwotlap**
Dialects	Volow
Language codes	
ISO 639-3	`mlv`
Glottolog	`motl1237` (http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/motl1237)[2]

Contents

The language

Geographic distribution

Mwotlap is spoken by about 2,100 people in the Banks Islands, in the North of Vanuatu. Among them, 1,640 live on the island of Mota Lava and its neighbor island, Ra. It is also spoken by a few hundred people living elsewhere in Vanuatu:

- Vanua Lava, particularly in the northeast
- Several other northern Vanuatu islands including Ureparapara, Gaua, and Ambae
- Port-Vila, the capital of Vanuatu
- Luganville, the country's second largest city, located on the island of Espiritu Santo

Classification

Mwotlap belongs to the Austronesian language family, which includes more than 1,200 languages. Inside its family, Mwotlap is an Oceanic language, descending from the hypothetical common ancestor of all Oceanic languages, Proto-Oceanic. More specifically, it is a Southern Oceanic language.

History

Robert Henry Codrington, an Anglican priest who studied Melanesian societies, first described Mwotlap in 1885. While focusing mainly on Mota, Codrington dedicated twelve pages of his work *The Melanesian Languages* to the "motlav" language. Despite being very short, this description can be used to show several changes that occurred in Mwotlap during the 20th century. Furthermore, Codrington described Volow, a language closely related to Mwotlap (sometimes even considered a dialect of Mwotlap). Volow, almost extinct today, was spoken in the east of Mota Lava, in the area of Aplow.

Phonology

Mwotlap contrasts 16 consonant phonemes.

	Labiovelar	Bilabial	Alveolar or Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Voiceless Stop	k͡pʷ		t	k	
Prenasalized voiced stop		ᵐb	ⁿd		
Fricative		β	s	ɣ	h
Nasal	ŋ͡mʷ	m	n	ŋ	
Lateral			l		
Approximant	w		j		

[p] exists as the allophone of /β/ word-finally, as in the name of the language, /ŋ͡mʷɔtlaβ/ [ŋ͡mʷɔtˈlap].

Mwotlap has 7 phonemic vowels, which are all short monophthongs, with no diphthongs being present in the language.[5]

	Front	Back
Close	i	u
Near-close	ɪ	ʊ
Open-mid	ɛ	ɔ
Open	a	

Stress always falls on the last syllable of a word.

Orthography

Because Mwotlap has been passed down by oral tradition, it has no official writing system. This article uses the orthography devised by linguist Alexandre François, based on the Latin alphabet.

Mwotlap alphabet[a 1]

Letter	a	b	d	e	ē	g	h	i	k	l	m	m̄
Pronunciation	[a]	[ᵐb]	[ⁿd]	[ɛ]	[ɪ]	[ɣ]	[h]	[i]	[k]	[l]	[m]	[ŋ͡m̄ʷ]
Letter	n	ñ	o	ō	p	q	s	t	u	v	w	y
Pronunciation	[n]	[ŋ]	[ɔ]	[ʊ]	[p]	[k͡pʷ]	[s]	[t]	[u]	[β]	[w]	[j]

Prosody

Mwotlap is not <u>tonal</u>. Stress falls on the last syllable of a word or syntagma.

Morphophonology

Syllables

Mwotlap's <u>syllable</u> structure is (C)V(C). This means that no more than two consonants can follow each other within a word and that no word can start or finish with more than one consonant. Recent loanwords, like *skul* (from English *school)*, are exceptions to this structure.

When a root beginning with two constants forms the beginning of a word, an <u>epenthetic</u> vowel (the same as the next vowel) is inserted between the two consonants.[6] For example, the root *troñ* ("drunk") can form the following:

- *me-troñ* [mɛt.rɔŋ] ("[he] got drunk"): the consonants *t* and *r* belong to two different syllables;
- *to*roñ [tɔ.rɔŋ] ("[they are] getting drunk"): the insertion of a vowel between *t* and *r* is necessary to prevent the syllable from starting with two consecutive consonants.

Vowel copying

Vowel copying is the tendency of certain prefixes to copy the first vowel of the following word.[6] Notable vowel copying prefixes include the article *na-*, the locative *le-*, and *te-*, a prefix used to form adjectives describing origin. These prefixes form *nō-vōy* ("volcano"), *ni-hiy* ("bone"), and *to-M̄otlap* ("from Mota Lava"), but also *na-pnō* ("island") and *na-nye-k* ("my blood"). Words stems beginning with two consonants do not permit vowel copying. Thus the stems vōʏ[7] and ʜɪʏ[8] allow their vowel to be copied, while the stems vɴō[9] and ᴅʏᴇ[10] do not.

Grammar

Mwotlap is an SVO language: the word order of a sentence is fixed and is always subject-verb-complement-adverbial.

The system of underlined personal pronouns contrasts clusivity, and distinguishes four numbers (singular, dual, trial, plural).[11] Human nouns also have four numbers; as for non-human nouns, they do not inflect for number and are expressed as singulars.[12]

Spatial reference in Mwotlap is based on a system of geocentric (absolute) directionals, which is in part typical of Oceanic languages, and in part innovative.[13]

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3. List of Banks islands languages (http://alex.francois.online.fr/AF-field.htm#Vanuatu); map of the 17 north Vanuatu languages (http://alex.francois.online.fr/AlexFrancois_Torba-languages_map-e.htm).
4. François (2012):97).
5. François (2005a): 445); François (2005b): 116).
6. François (2000)
7. See entry *vōy* (http://alex.francois.online.fr/Lex/Mwotlap-v.html#%E2%93%94v%C5%8Dy%E 2%93%971) in the *Online Mwotlap dictionary*.
8. See entry *hiy* (http://alex.francois.online.fr/Lex/Mwotlap-h.html#%E2%93%94hiy%E2%93%97 2) in the *Online Mwotlap dictionary*.
9. See entry *v[ō]nō* (http://alex.francois.online.fr/Lex/Mwotlap-v.html#%E2%93%94v%5B%C5%8 D%5Dn%C5%8D) in the *Online Mwotlap dictionary*.
10. See entry *d[e]ye~* (http://alex.francois.online.fr/Lex/Mwotlap-d.html#%E2%93%94d%5Be%5Dy e~) in the *Online Mwotlap dictionary*.
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External links

- (in French) Introduction to Mwotlap and Motalava culture, photos, maps, songs, myths and stories (http://alex.francois.online.fr/AF-motalava-e.htm)
- Access to several stories in Mwotlap (http://alex.francois.online.fr/AFtxt_select_e.htm) (with English and French translations).
- Audio recordings in the Mwotlap language (https://pangloss.cnrs.fr/corpus/list_rsc_en.php?lg=Mwotlap), in open access, by A. François (source: *Pangloss Collection* of CNRS).
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